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Books of The Times

NEW YORK TIMES

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Butter, Bugging and Burning Tree

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

VANISHED. By Fletcher Knebel. 407 pages. Doubleday. $5.95.

HER name is Butter Nygaard. She is a pot-smoking pop sculptress. She lives in Washington and, when not out on some late "date," shares an apartment with the Presidential press secretary's stenographer and girl friend. Butter used to work for the Central Intelligence Agency and, in fact, still does, though no one is supposed to know. Her current mission? To spy on the President of the United States. Why? Well, that's the story of "Vanished," Fletcher Knebel's latest fictional escapade into Washington politics. Mr. Knebel, is of course, the author of several best-sellers, including "Seven Days in May," (written with Charles W. Bailey) and "Night at Camp David." He has his ups and downs. "Vanished" is definitely an up—a political suspense novel that really has some suspense. If the characters are not fully rounded, they at least appear in bas-relief. If the plot is not entirely convincing under later scrutiny, it does hold together while one is reading. If English prose style is not enhanced by the novel, neither is it slaughtered.

Alex Gotfryd

Fletcher Knebel

Pleasing Entertainment

All of which is a lot more than can be said of most novels of the type. "Vanished," in short, is pleasing entertainment. It is not a book that demands much; nor does it offend. The background detailing, especially of interagency competitiveness, seems authentic enough. The story holds one's attention—at least it held mine—even though it has some dead or muddling spots.

Besides intrigue, there is wit, warmth, and a nice, antidepressant twist at the end. However, it does seem pertinent to note that I read it between Kleenexes, as it were, while sparring with some stubborn bug. Not an ideal condition for pure or sneezeless judgment, perhaps, but occasionally of use: good books for sick friends are hard to come by, and here is one.

But back to Butter. Butter's mission is to report to C.I.A. Director Arthur Ingram whatever she can find out about the following mysterious occurrences. First, what does the President know about the disappearance of his close friend and White House confidante, Stephen Greer, from the No. 4 green of Burning Tree golf course? Second, why has the President specifically excluded the C.I.A. from investigating the Greer case, even when matters of national security seem to be involved?

For the Greer case, and the peculiar secrecy surrounding it, has set Washington on its ear. Was Greer kidnapped? Was he a homosexual about to be blackmailed or exposed—and thus endangering the President's re[illegible] the stock manipulations of a strange computer complex? Or was he a defector to Moscow or Peking?

The President is mum, the F.B.I. is mum, but the clamor for answers to these questions grows louder as the disappearances of two famous scientists are also revealed, and then that of a freelance news reporter, and finally of an intelligence agent investigating, against White House orders, some mysterious doings off the coast of Brazil. Rumors of treason, or something close to it, start spreading, and a budding McCarthyite politician asks damning questions of the President on national television. Meanwhile, a Soviet sub is spotted in the South Atlantic, a huge hydrogen test bomb is detonated over China, which seems to startle the President, and the opposition party, smelling scandal and victory, begins to tighten certain strings.

Tightening Strings

One string is around the President's neck; another around the C.I.A. director's. But the string that hurts most is that around the neck of Gene Culligan, the President's loyal press secretary, who narrates most of the story. Even his eventual undoing of Butter does not ease the pressure; Only the startling revelations at the end can do that—and these I will leave to the reader to discover and maybe ponder.

For the resolution does raise questions—about man's will for peace, about élitism and its effects, about competitive professionalism and its limitations, about the price of security and secrecy and how democratic a democracy can be these days, and about ends and means. Still, the story is the main thing; speaking for myself, I enjoyed it.

End Papers

COUNTDOWN '68: Profiles for the Presidency. By William Schechter. 227 pages. Fleet. $4.95.

Every four years millions of Americans, half of whom normally ignore interim elections, are swept up in the excitement of a Presidential campaign and quickly become partisan "experts" on the candidates and the issues.

For those who would like to have their expertise well founded, William Schechter, a former newspaperman, has written a book that deals knowledgeably with some of the likely contenders for the Presidency, their position on current issues, their records and basic philosophy and what they are like as people. In a crisp, lively style, Mr. Schechter reports on Govs. George Romney, Ronald Reagan and Rockefeller, former Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Senator Charles H. Percy, most actively considered for the Republican nomination; and President Johnson, Vice President Hubert Humphrey and Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York, who dominate the Democratic scene. Conspicuously missing from the list are Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, who is opposing President Johnson in the primaries on the peace issue, and ex-Gov. George Wallace of Alabama, so far undeclared.

Yet, omissions aside, this is a useful, even-handed, not uncritical treatment, and carries introductions by both the Republican and Democratic national chairmen.

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